

THE ARMAGEDDON GAME



LYNNE FOX
BOOK THREE

THE ARMAGEDDON GAME

by
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AN M-Y BOOKS PAPERBACK



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PROLOGUE

The cottage stood alone against the barren landscape of the headland, with its back to the sea as protection against the worst of the weather it made a defiant stand against the crashing violence of the waves.

The only approach was a single track covered with a thick layer of snow and ice that crackled under Inspector Munroe's tyres and hid the ruts and potholes. He drove with extreme caution, the journey a nerve-wracking test of his vehicle's suspension.

Pulling up outside the front door, once painted a jaunty maritime blue but now peeling in layers, he stepped out of the car. His feet sank into the soft snow just deep enough that it topped the rim of his shoes, the warmth from his body melting it on contact. His woollen socks soaked up the moisture, the cold travelling up his legs at an alarming rate. He shuddered, shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and hunching down against the arctic atmosphere, trudged toward the cottage door.

The police tape had long since been removed, the only evidence of its ever being there a couple of short lengths still tied to the chicken wire fencing, flapping like ticker tape in the wind. The door was unlocked, forensic had gathered all its evidence months ago and the place was no longer of interest as a scene of crime.

Turning the round knob handle he pushed against the door's resistance. The damp salt air had warped both door and frame so that he had to place his shoulder against it and use his full body weight to force it. Opening with a reluctant, ear-piercing shriek as it scraped over the wooden floor it was as though the cottage itself resented his intrusion.

Pushing it shut he stood with his back to the door, his eyes slowly adjusting to the gloom within. His breath hung in the air, frosted crystals of moisture; it seemed colder in here than outside. Instinctively he gathered his jacket closer to him as though huddling into a cosy duvet although it did nothing to dispel the cold. Nothing moved; the air inside the cottage was as still as the air inside a sepulchre, fetid with the lingering sweet smell of rotting flesh.

Outside the clouds briefly parted allowing the sun's rays to pierce the grime on the window to his right sending a shaft of brilliance across the room. Like a macabre stage setting it illuminated a deep seated armchair.

With effort he took a couple of steps forward feeling he was dragging his legs through molasses; his eyes darting about the room as though expecting someone to be there.

Beginning in the far left corner he slowly and methodically canvassed every piece of furniture, every cloth covering. He pulled books from the bookshelf, opening each one and shaking them in turn. Idly he fingered a couple of the chess pieces, still laid out on the table, wondering if there was some significance in their positions on the board but he'd never played the game so its nuances meant little to him. Taking hold of one of the two wooden dining chairs he climbed onto it to give him more height and ran his fingers along the picture rail. What he was looking for he didn't rightly know. The forensic team had gone over the scene with meticulous care; he didn't doubt their diligence or expertise but there had to be something; something they

had missed and he would stay here, searching, until he found it.

Three hours later, each of the four rooms examined and still nothing. He'd completely lost track of time, even the gradual fading of light hadn't registered; he'd simply taken out his torch to examine things more closely. Now, as he looked out the window he realised there was no way he would be driving back tonight. The snow had increased to a blizzard whilst he was inside; now covering the earth like an animal pelt. It was a complete white-out, the screaming gale and ferocious crashing of the waves below him a disembodied voice of a soul in torment.

As he stood by the kitchen window his hand knocked against a kerosene lamp standing on the draining board. He lifted it cautiously and felt the weight and heard the slosh of its liquid fuel. Fumbling in his pocket he found his lighter and with a misplaced sense of relief, lit the mantle.

CHAPTER 1

It's been three years since I was returned to St Joseph's Psychiatric Hospital, the past two spent in the wing for the criminally insane because I'd killed Dr Metcalfe during one of our therapy sessions.

The authorities were none too pleased with me. Dr Metcalfe had been the hospital's shining light, an advocate for adopting more humane treatment of the psychologically deranged. The general consensus had been that I was evidence such an approach was flawed so security had been enhanced, rules more stringently followed and any outside interference with the running of St Joseph's strongly opposed.

There were no strait jackets or inmates manacled to beds and to my knowledge the one and only padded cell had never been used. It was more a case of constant surveillance. The security cameras had been increased three-fold and no-one from my wing ever went anywhere without a minder, two in the case of the more unpredictable.

I was now down to one having behaved myself impeccably since the Dr Metcalfe incident and he - his name was Alberto - was becoming more relaxed in my company. I'd never told why I'd killed Dr Metcalfe; there was little point as I knew they'd never believe me so I said nothing.

My new therapist, Dr Chang, brought all his many years of experience and knowledge to bear but still was unable to elicit my reason. He didn't have the calm, self-assurance of Dr Metcalfe; his frustration was palpable. Quite a nondescript little Chinese man he wore suits made of a pale yellowish beige that his skin colour merged with so well that, in half light, it was difficult to determine where Dr Chang left off and the suit began.

Of course, Dr Chang's therapy sessions and the many pills I obediently swallowed weren't going to cure me because I wasn't criminally or otherwise insane. I'd known exactly what I was doing, I always have. In the case of Dr Metcalfe it was clear, after what he'd told me, that whilst he was in control of St Joseph's I would never be discharged so killing him didn't exactly alter my situation.

Of course, the wing I was now on was somewhat more austere than the rest of the hospital but it was liveable with. The bed was comfortable enough even if the mattress was made of a material that resisted heat, ripping or tearing and the base made of extremely tough moulded glass fibre. My room was sparse but there were a few hooks for hanging things albeit made of moulded rubber so they bent over if any real weight was put on them and the clothes hangers were of cardboard. Bars on the windows and observation slits in the door were no different to the general wards so I was used to that.

The only real downside was the layout of the building. St Joseph's was Victorian and built on a radial plan with long wings stretching out from a central hub. The majority of these wings had been demolished to make way for better design but the criminally insane were still housed in those that remained. This design led to a lack of natural light and prevented a healthy circulation of air and is generally regarded these days as inhumane but I guess the trustees of St Joseph's felt it was all we deserved. However, there

were compensations; we were still allowed to use the gym and swimming pool, had Sky TV and plenty of recreational activities.

Of course, to have any of these benefits one had to show willing and take part in the various therapy sessions; both the one to one's with an allotted therapist and the group sessions. I enjoyed the group sessions best; it was fascinating to listen to the other inmates baring their souls, displaying their vulnerabilities - an excellent finishing school for a psychopath!

All in all, being in St Joseph's again wasn't so bad but I had no intention of remaining in the care of the psychiatric profession any longer than I had to; how to get out was the problem. The first step was to be moved back into the lesser risk accommodation and in that respect I was well on the way to persuading Dr Chang that I no longer posed any threat; that Dr Metcalfe was simply an aberration; I knew I'd been a naughty girl and I'd never do it again.

I'd just finished a session with Dr Chang and could sense he was close to transferring me when we were interrupted by one of the nurses. She walked across and whispered in Dr Chang's ear, giving surreptitious glances in my direction as she did so. He made a brief nod of acknowledgement and turned to me as the nurse quietly closed the door behind her.

'Annalee, there's an Inspector Munroe at reception asking to speak with you. He apparently has some news for you regarding your parents. Will you meet with him?'

Possibilities raced across my mind; death, accident, divorce? Did I really care one way or the other? I hadn't seen them for years; they'd emigrated to Australia during my first sojourn in St Joseph's. Yet it would be interesting to see how Inspector Munroe was faring; he and I went back a long way and he, along with Dr Metcalfe, was primarily the

reason I was back in St Joseph's. I gave a slightly concerned look toward Dr Chang. 'Will you be with me?'

'No, but Alberto will be.' Dr Chang looked across at Alberto, sitting mute in the back of the room; since Dr Metcalfe no-one except Alberto was inclined to be alone with me.

I turned toward him also. 'Oh, ok then,' and smiled warmly.

Alberto was a tall, black man, extremely handsome with the physique of a prize fighter. I could never understand why he had been appointed my main supervisor; with his attributes I would have thought he'd be far more useful with one of the burly, violent inmates. Despite Dr Metcalfe I was hardly a physical threat; female, diminutive - only five foot three - he could restrain me with one hand. Still, he *was* gorgeous and although I wouldn't claim we'd formed a friendship we did have a mutual respect aided by the fact that I was secretly helping him with his written English.

'The Inspector has been shown to Room 1-4-5, Alberto.' Dr Chang closed his copious file on me with, I felt, a sense of relief and Alberto ushered me from the room.



DCI Munroe rose from the chair on which he was sitting, good manners obviously deeply ingrained then, remembering who it was he was standing to greet, swiftly sat down again retracting his proffered hand. 'Miss Theakston.'

It was clear his animosity toward me had not lessened with the passing of time. He continued to believe that I was responsible for the death of his daughter, Lily. His turning up again so unexpectedly was a little disconcerting. As far as I was concerned the game was over; with the death of his daughter I'd had my revenge for what I considered was his

part in the death of my brother yet I had to admit that I'd missed our verbal confrontations; the intellectual challenge had been stimulating. Sparring with the doctors in St Joseph's was dull by comparison.

'Good morning, Inspector, it's been a long time; I trust you are well.'

I could tell, with some satisfaction, that he was anything but well. He had always been, to my mind, painfully thin but now he was almost skeletal. He'd lost more of his hair, the bald patch at the crown being crept up upon by the widow's peak rapidly forming at the front; his cheeks were sunken with darkness about the eyes and his overly long neck poked out from a slightly loose shirt collar, sinewy tendons clearly visible. As he crossed his legs his trousers flapped about them like a skirt there was so much unrequired material. It was obvious the years had not been kind to Inspector Munroe.

Alberto directed me to the upright chair opposite Munroe then retired to the side of the room and leant against the wall. Munroe's eyes drifted over toward him.

'Alberto is my minder,' I explained, 'he goes with me everywhere.' I smiled sweetly.

Munroe cleared his throat. 'Miss Theakston, I have some news regarding your parents.'

'So I've been given to understand.'

'You may not have been aware but at the time of your trial and conviction for the murder of Dr Metcalfe's fiancée, Melissa Hartnell ...'

I raised my hand to stop him. 'Which I *did not commit*.'

Munroe took a deep breath and continued, ignoring my interruption. '... the authorities advised your parents, as next of kin, of events.'

'How very considerate.'

Refusing to be distracted Munroe ploughed on. 'They expressed a wish to be kept informed of your progress and

treatment although they have continued to refuse any direct contact with you.'

I said nothing, gazing at Munroe impassively. I could tell he was warming to his subject. His eyes glittered slightly in the finger of sunshine that was creeping across the room.

'So, when your circumstances changed ...'

I raised an incredulous eyebrow. 'Please, Inspector there's no need to be coy, you mean when I killed Dr Metcalfe.'

'Just so, Miss Theakston, when you killed Dr Metcalfe I naturally took steps to inform your parents but not getting any response I contacted my counterparts in Australia.' Munroe shifted slightly in his seat, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward toward me, his elbows on his thighs. 'I'm sorry to tell you, Miss Theakston that your mother has died in suspicious circumstances and your father has confessed to killing her.' Obviously anything but sorry Munroe couldn't resist adding, very quietly as though to himself, 'seems to run in the family, doesn't it?'

Refusing to rise to the bait I merely asked, 'What has any of this got to do with me?'

Munroe, affronted at my lack of concern said, 'They are your parents, I would have thought you would at least be interested in how any of this has come about; what the Australian police have discovered.'

'Very well, Inspector please, enlighten me.'

'I believe you are aware that both your parents have an issue with alcohol.'

I snorted derisively. 'Oh please, Inspector do drop the niceties. They were both functioning alcoholics.'

'Indeed, so I understand. It seems that during one of their alcohol-fuelled arguments your mother confessed to an affair thirty two years ago that resulted in a pregnancy. The child she consequently bore was you. Miss Theakston, I'm sorry to have to advise you that you are *not* your father's

biological child. When he learnt of your mother's deception – one that had continued for the vast majority of their marriage – Mr Theakston confessed that he completely snapped and helped on by his alcohol-induced state dealt your mother a blow which resulted in her death.'

Munroe leant back in his chair and re-crossed his legs, barely able to keep the satisfied smirk from his face and recalling our previous encounters continued. 'It seems that you needn't have bothered with the personas you adopted in the past when playing your little games – you're not who you thought you were anyway – quite ironic, don't you think?'

The smugness in his tone was infuriating. I tucked my hands under my legs, sitting on them to control the anger that was bubbling up inside, forcing myself into a display of outward calm. 'Well, thank you for that, Inspector. What happens now?'

'As your father, I beg your pardon Mr Theakston has confessed there won't be much of a trial, more a matter of sentencing. I'll keep you informed of what the judges decide.'

'Thank you, that's very kind.' I stood indicating the meeting was at an end. Alberto levered himself off the wall and came towards me. 'Just a thought, Inspector; did my mother divulge *who* she had her affair with?'

'According to Mr Theakston, no, only that it was someone associated with the firm where she worked all those years ago.'

'I see.' I turned away but as an afterthought paused at the door, 'I almost forgot to ask, so rude of me; how is Mrs Munroe?'

Munroe stiffened, hesitated and turned away before he spoke. 'Mrs Munroe is as well as can be expected.'

'Oh dear, I'm *so* sorry; I imagine it's the death of your daughter, Lily? I would think that would put an intolerable

strain on anyone. How are you bearing up?’

Munroe said nothing, merely stared at me, the hatred in his eyes unmistakable.

‘Good day, Inspector. I’ll wait to hear of developments.’
With that I glanced at Alberto and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER 2

Sitting by the barred window back in my room I pondered the news DCI Munroe had given me. It was moments like this that I really missed Liliad, my marionette. For many years she'd been a constant companion, someone I could bounce ideas off. I know she didn't talk back, I'm not insane but somehow talking to her made things clearer; she was my silent support, the only one I was ever truly myself with.

I'd bought her several years previously from a toy shop in The Lanes in Brighton. Normally I'd walk past a toy shop window without giving it a second glance but something, I was never quite sure what, had drawn me to the layout. My eyes scanned the various items; plastic trains, skipping ropes, Lego, jigsaws, picture books - the whole paraphernalia of children's entertainment but nothing captured my attention and I was about to turn away when my gaze was inexorably drawn toward the back of the display.

A doll stared back at me, her wide blemish-free oval eyes compelling me to remain. Her irises were as green as ivy with huge pupils the deep liquid black of its berries. I felt as though I was falling. Transfixed by the delicacy of her features, the craftsmanship was so exquisite I thought she was made of porcelain.

Without conscious thought I found myself inside the shop. The owner, his hands fluttering before him like an agitated butterfly, was instantly by my side. 'I see you've noticed our marionette,' he observed.

'Marionette? I thought it was just an ordinary doll.'

'Oh dear me no; there's nothing 'ordinary' about this little lady.' So saying he reached across and extracted her from amongst the other toys. Up close my eyes widened in further surprise. 'She's made of wood!'

'Indeed, what did you think she was made of?'

'Well, she's so delicate I thought it was porcelain or something.'

He smiled knowingly. 'An understandable mistake; in fact she's carved from a solid piece taken from the centre of an ancient oak. If you look closely at her torso ...' he gently pulled up the little blouse, '... you can see the rings of the tree growth. She is the heart of the oak and it continues to live through her.'

Untangling the strings he held her a few inches above the ground. 'Here, you take hold and see if you can make her move.'

Gently he placed my fingers in the correct positions, 'Make her walk toward the door.'

To my delight she strode forward.

'You're a natural,' he exclaimed.

'It's so easy; I don't feel I'm doing anything much.'

His smile widened but he said nothing, just waited.

'How much?' I asked and she was mine.

They'd taken her away from me after the Dr Metcalfe incident, concerned that I might strangle myself with her strings or tear off a wooden limb to fashion a weapon. Complete nonsense as I had no intention of killing myself and would never deliberately hurt Liliad for any reason. For the present Liliad is confined to a shelf in the locked store

room. Lately, in return for his English lessons I've managed to persuade Alberto to take me down there and let me have a few private moments with her. She's taking her incarceration with a stoicism that makes me proud, believing unerringly that we will be together again one day. I do not intend to disappoint her.

I closed my eyes to more precisely recall my meeting with DCI Munroe. I wasn't surprised at his ill-concealed pleasure at the news he had to impart; in his eyes he had good reason to hate me. He believed that I had killed his daughter, Lily. She had fallen while on a hiking trip in Scotland and all Munroe had was a photograph that she'd instinctively clicked as she'd gone over the edge which showed a small section of someone's sleeve but the image was so blurred it was impossible to pick out any distinguishing features.

Despite all his efforts Munroe had been unable to prove my involvement and instead had me convicted for the murder of Dr Metcalfe's fiancée, Melissa Hartnell. It was true I'd deliberately befriended her and had enjoyed myself creating a sense of distrust between her and Dr Metcalfe aiming to ruin their relationship but to convict me of killing her had been a complete fabrication based on purely circumstantial evidence as the irony was I really hadn't killed *her*.

Seeing him again after so long was a welcome break from the monotony of St Joseph's; I'd run rings around him in the past yet I had to acknowledge he'd won the last confrontation; after all, I was back in St Joseph's and that was a major problem.



It was a couple of months later that Inspector Munroe turned up again. By now I was out of the high security wing

having been correct in my assessment that Dr Chang considered me no longer a risk.

They'd allowed me to keep Alberto as my main carer; the nurse who'd held that position on my previous stay, Betty Fletcher apparently refusing to have anything more to do with me; understandable I suppose, I'd always thought she had a soft spot for Dr Metcalfe. The current situation suited me fine, Alberto was far more malleable and definitely better looking.

Once again in room 1-4-5 I observed Munroe with amusement; he seemed to be torn between a sadistic pleasure at the news he was about to impart and an opposing desire not to have anything to do with me.

'Miss Theakston, I'm afraid I have to be the bearer of more upsetting news,' he paused, obviously relishing the moment, 'your father, or rather, Mr Theakston ...'

'You may continue to refer to him as my father, Inspector, after all he and I both believed he was for over thirty years. It seems churlish to deny him that title now.'

Munroe shrugged, 'Very well, as you wish. I'm sorry to have to tell you that your father hung himself whilst in prison awaiting trial.'

I didn't react to Munroe's news although I did feel a slight disappointment in my father; to give up so soon seemed like a betrayal of self. 'Is that all, Inspector?'

Munroe hesitated, unsettled by my lack of concern. 'Yes, I suppose it is except that I'm informed by the Australian police that the solicitors dealing with your father's estate will be in touch with you shortly. They've been passed your current address.'

'I see, I shall wait to hear then.' I stood giving a beckoning glance to Alberto who moved to open the door but as a parting shot I said to Munroe, 'I wonder if we will meet again, Inspector.'

Munroe spoke as though the prospect was his worst nightmare. 'I sincerely hope not, Miss Theakston, I see no reason why our paths should cross in the future.'

I simply smiled and left the room.

Turning to Alberto as we made our way back to the main lounge I asked, 'Alberto, do you think Dr Chang will let me have Liliad back again now that I'm so greatly improved? Would you ask him please?'

Alberto nodded.

'Thank you I won't forget your help.' I glanced at the lounge clock, 'Oh good, it's almost lunchtime.'



Alberto was as good as his word, or in his case his silent nod; Liliad was back! I can't express what a joyful reunion it was. She was a little grimy from all her months sat on a shelf in the store cupboard but I cleaned her with meticulous care until her black hair gleamed like spilled oil and her eyes sparkled with a renewed mischief.

I was just bringing her up to date with Munroe's latest revelation when Alberto walked in bearing an airmail letter. Normally any correspondence for inmates would have been opened by the hospital authorities but as Alberto had been present at my meetings with Inspector Munroe and so was aware of the circumstances I'd managed to persuade him that in this instance it would not only be inappropriate for the trustees of St Joseph's to be made aware of my dealings with the Australian solicitors but such communications should rightly be kept private. Also, coming as it did from a reputable firm of solicitors it was hardly likely to contain anything untoward.

Consequently Alberto made it his business to intercept the mail, picking out an airmail letter an easy task amongst so little correspondence anyway.

I waited until he'd closed the door behind him before opening the envelope. As one would expect the letter was typed on the solicitors' headed paper and formally written. It was dated a week ago.

"Dear Ms Theakston

THE ESTATE OF JOHN ROBERT THEAKSTON

We are acting on behalf of the estate of the above-named and understand you have been advised by the Endover Police Force, namely by a DCI Munroe of the tragic circumstances of the deaths of both your mother, Brenda Anne Theakston and of the above-named.

Please accept our condolences.

Under the terms of her Will, at the time of your mother's death her estate passed in its entirety to Mr Theakston with the proviso that should he predecease her, her estate would pass to the Sydney Animal Rescue Centre.

As, in law, a person may not benefit from their crime your mother's estate bypasses Mr Theakston and settles on the residuary beneficiary, that is, the animal charity."

What a bitch! I might have guessed that's what she'd do; she must really have hated me.

"Although Mr Theakston had made a small provision for you in his Will we have to advise that his estate was in considerable debt and we believe that once all his assets have been liquidised and his debts settled only a nominal amount will be left.

We will, of course, keep you advised of progress but in the meantime, we require various documentation and details from you as itemised on the accompanying sheet. We would appreciate your swift response and will keep you updated of progress.

Yours xxxxxx”

I read the letter over twice, once out loud to Liliad. ‘Well, thanks a lot Mother and Father. Bastards to the end!’ I still had a fair amount behind me, enough to support me whilst I carved out a new life for myself outside St Joseph’s because ‘outside’ is where I intended to be and I wasn’t going to wait much longer.

Sitting with Liliad on my lap I looked hard into her eyes. ‘We need to think this through carefully, Liliad; we really do.’



‘Where do you think your parents will be buried?’

Alberto’s question caught me by surprise, coming as it did during one of our illicit written English lessons.

‘Why? Are you hoping for a trip to Australia?’

Alberto grinned completely transforming his features, his teeth a dazzling white against the blackness of his skin, even and of regular size; he’d be perfect for a toothpaste advertisement. ‘In your dreams, Annalee; in your dreams.’

I couldn’t believe the thought hadn’t occurred to me before as what happened to my parents remains was of little interest but maybe that was a mistake; how they were disposed of could prove useful. I brought our lesson to an abrupt close and once Alberto had gone began to plan.

I arranged a meeting with Dr Chang.

‘Thank you for seeing me at such short notice, Dr Chang.’

Dr Chang nodded, sat back in his chair with an air of patient authority, placed his hands up towards his face, finger tips together and waited for me to continue.

‘I expect you’re aware of my sad news.’

He nodded and gave a conciliatory smile. ‘Yes, Annalee I am. I was very sorry; it must be a lot for you to deal with.’